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SUBJECT: DARI-PASHTO DEBATE DEADLOCKS PARLIAMENT

REF: KABUL 1193 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Action in Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga (the National Assembly's Lower House) has stalled over a higher education bill because of disagreements over the Pashto and Dari usage of the word "university." The disagreement has stopped most activity in the lower house for more than a week, delaying consideration of other important bills on election law and the country's national development strategy. The inability of MPs to move beyond the dispute shows continued animosity from last session's ethnically charged quarrel over 10 Wolesi Jirga seats reserved for Kuchi nomads (reftel) has not fully subsided.

¶2. (SBU) After a fast start to the new legislative session that began on July 22, action at the Wolesi Jirga ground to a halt last week over the higher education bill's supposed favoring of one of the country's two official languages over the other. Pashtun nationalist MPs charge the Dari word for university, "Danesh-Gah," is a foreign word of Farsi/Iranian origin that should not be used for official government business. Dari-speaking Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras counter the term is just as prevalent in Afghan society as the Pashto "Pohantoon." MPs agree the Constitution designates Dari and Pashto as the country's two official languages and offers protections to speakers of other minority languages, but some Pashtuns have decried what they see as Farsi words intruding on Afghan culture (Dari and Farsi are mutually intelligible to native speakers).

¶3. (SBU) MP Saleh Mohammad Regestani (Panjshir, Tajik), Legislation Committee chairman, said a small number of Pashtun MPs were holding firm on a seemingly minor issue in revenge for last session's Tajik-led walkout over inflammatory comments by a Pashtun Kuchi MP. Some parliament staff have accused Regestani and other Tajik MPs of egging on their Pashtun rivals to make a stand on cultural issues and hyping accusations of a "Pashtunization" of the GIROA led by Farouk Wardak, President Karzai's advisor for parliamentary affairs. Regestani knows the debate over language usage strikes many outsiders as trivial and hopes to score points as a leader in parliament by brokering a compromise. MPs agreed late last week to pass the issue on to a constitutional commission to decide whether to accept the Dari term or recognize the Pashto word as the sole acceptable term for the government's use. Hopes that this would lead to a quick resolution and quiet ethno-linguistic rabble rousing

may be in vain -- the constitutional commission charged by the Constitution with settling these types of matters does not yet exist, as the government has not appointed its members.

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